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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the Kentucky Education Reform Act (KERA) and its impact on school facilities planning and community involvement in related decision making. Since 1900, the pattern of rural school reform, nationally and in Kentucky, has been one of increased state and federal control, with cost effectiveness and equity the primary criteria in setting school budgets. As a result, school districts in Kentucky declined from over 1,000 to 176. School buildings, despite increasing enrollment, declined from over 8,500 to fewer than 1,400. Changes in the way school facilities are improved or closed have come about indirectly from KERA. KERA was enacted in 1990 in response to a class action fiscal equity suit, and replaced all previous educational legislation. In addition to fiscal and curricular reforms, KERA mandated governance reforms that include site-based decision making, state-level administrative reorganization, and revision of the state school facilities manual (the "Grey Book"). The Grey Book had frequently forced consolidation by focusing almost exclusively on economies of scale criteria and forbidding state aid for facilities construction or repairs when those criteria were not met in every building in a school district. The obvious contradictions between the Grey Book and KERA's site-based decision making led to new facilities criteria. However, there remains a cost to those districts retaining very small schools. Case studies of proposed school closings and consolidation in Henderson and Floyd Counties illustrate the revised facilities planning process but also show how local political dysfunction can overwhelm even the best schools. KERA's decentralized and participatory decision-making model may not be applicable in other states, and it is too soon to see if it will make profound differences in Kentucky. But the opportunities in KERA for accommodation of small rural schools and parent participation should be useful to small-school advocates elsewhere. (SAS)

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PARENT PARTICIPATION, SCHOOL ACCOUNTABILITY AND RURAL EDUCATION: THE IMPACT OF KERA ON SCHOOL CONSOLIDATION IN KENTUCKY

(paper presention, AERA annual mtg. 1998)

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Improvement and reform for rural schools in the US has typically been inspired from urban and state places and agendas rather than from rural ones; and much rural education reform has involved the closure or consolidation of rural school districts and schools 1. The general pattern of this process has been that local school control since at least 1900 has given way to state and federal control. Local authorities or trustees who organized and controlled small schools and districts earlier have had their authority removed to more distant locations in county and state organizations. Since mid-century, cost/effectiveness and equity have become primary criteria in setting school budgets, and instructional accountability rather than other functions schools used to provide have become trivialized 2.

State facilities policy in Kentucky followed the national trend until the early 1990s 3. Once upon a time, there were over one thousand school districts in Kentucky, as many small towns and villages could legally operate their own schools. As the state department of education continued to mandate cost effectiveness measures, most of these districts were forced to merge in order to continue receiving state dollars for schooling. Today, there are only 120 county school systems and 56

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independent school districts remaining. Independent school districts in Kentucky are primarily to be found in small rural towns of the state which have chosen to remain independent from surrounding county school systems and have the financial resources for so doing.

At the building level, school consolidation ran amok throughout this century, reaching crescendo proportions following WWII. Since the depression of the 1930's, Kentucky schools have declined in number from over 8,500 to fewer than 1,400 today, even as the population of the state has continued to climb and enrollments are much higher than six decades ago 4. The era of extensive highway building and cheap oil and gas made possible the yellow school bus era of the 1950s and 1960s when most school consolidations and district mergers occurred. The school bus enabled student teacher ratios in rural schools to climb, and school buses have typically been cheaper to buy and maintain than larger professional staffs.

The limits of school consolidation and large schools have become visible of late, and numerous studies have challenged the notion that larger schools are better schools 5. In Kentucky, the assumption that consolidated schools are automatically better schools has most recently been criticized, and has become particularly suspect since the Kentucky Education Reform Act (KERA). KERA came about in response to a class action fiscal equity suit won by sixty-six county districts against the state school board.

Fiscal and Curricular reforms of KERA

Changes in the way school facilities are improved, closed or consolidated have come about indirectly as a result of Kentucky's reform act, although this was by no means an early undertaking of the state legislature. In order to discuss the changes which began to occur by 1993, brief discussion of the Act is required to set the stages for new facilities guidelines.

KERA came about as the result of litigation by property poor school districts which educated tens of thousands of impoverished Kentucky children. The suit claimed that the then existing minimum foundation program did not adequately compensate these districts enough to provide the same sort of quality education as property wealthy districts. The resulting inequities, they claimed, deprived students of their state constitutional rights.

Two separate court actions during 1989 found in favor of the plaintiffs. The first ruled that Kentucky's funding mechanism for poorer schools was discriminatory and required alteration. The second opinion, from the Chief Justice of the state Supreme Court went further, arguing that the entire system of public education in Kentucky was inadequate and required a complete overhaul. All school laws were ruled invalid in this second ruling, and the state legislature and executive branches were ordered to construct an entire system of new school laws and the institutions to administer them by 1990.

The Kentucky Education Reform Act, which was published in a 1,000 page document, became law during the 1990 school year 6.

KERA mandated changes and the planning of changes in the financial, curricular and organizational operations of all public schools. While each of these types of changes had important implications for rural Kentucky schools, it is arguable that the philosophy behind the organizational changes are most responsible for reforms in the process of considering and improving or abandoning small, rural schools.

Equity in school finance was a primary target of KERA. In general, local property values were substantially minimized as the basis upon which schools in Kentucky are funded today. Kentucky schools are currently funded primarily from revenues channeled directly through the state rather than from local ones as has historically been the case. New revenues for schools have been garnered by several mechanisms, including the raising of the state sales tax from 5% to 6%. Local revenues are also used to fund Kentucky schools, but KERA required all real property to be reappraised during the early 1990s. This was ordered under the belief that some districts intentionally undervalued real property for political reasons. All property valuators were also required to be certified/retrained toward this end.

Several critical elements of KERA involve rethinking and altering what students study and how this learning is evaluated since 1990. Without going into great detail, new curricular standards require more active learning and problem-solving strategies by students, better focus upon student transitions to the next educational level (whether in the next school type or to

the world of work), and the refinement and reorganization of curriculum units by committees of educators and citizens groups. Ungraded primaries in elementary schools were mandatory (but now optional) features of KERA, and block scheduling is now seen as a desirable and logical extension of the reform act at the secondary level.

Curriculum reform has also been extensively tied to new assessment protocols in Kentucky. The state invested millions of dollars creating a test (KIRIS) that would determine the extent to which schools were improving toward desired objectives of the system. KIRIS assessments included performance events, cooperative projects and portfolios, among other strategies. The underlying philosophy of KERA and KIRIS is that schools, rather than children, are the primary units of analysis in the equation of educational performance or underperformance. Thus, KIRIS is a "high stakes" exam. Schools which fail to continuously progress toward their target improvement goals can be declared "schools in crisis." At the other extreme, schools that exceed their individually determined target goals are financially rewarded by the state.

KERA Governance reforms

Reforms in the governance and philosophy of governance of Kentucky schools today are likely the primary cause behind a new facilities planning process which can and likely has "saved" an undetermined number of small schools which previously would have been closed by the state department of education. Touted as

"Third Wave" reforms, the philosophy of KERA was that school boards and district superintendents were to be stripped of most of their administrative power, and decisions about school structure, curricula and personnel were to be made (and reinforced or sanctioned) at the building level rather than the district level. The conviction was both that important decisions had to be made as close to classroom interactions as possible, and that parents had to become intricately involved in day-to-day operations of school.

To this end, all 1400 (approximately) Kentucky schools were instructed to create Site Based Decision Making councils within five years. SBDM councils were to be comprised from three teachers, two parents and the building principal - or larger councils of the same proportion of teachers, parents and administrators.

Contradictions between pre and post KERA school Facilities Planning

In addition to redefining school district administrative policy, the state reform mandate also abolished both the State Department of Education and the State Board of Education, administrative units reconstituted by KERA in 1990. Among the many changes was that the formerly elected chief state school officer, the State Superintendent, was made an appointed office under control of the State Board of Education, itself transformed by KERA.

Among the early issues facing the new state board was revising

the state school facilities manual which had for decades been used as administrative policy for considering building capacities, requirements and priorities for new school construction and existing school renovation. As described below, the "Grey Book" used in school facilities review focused almost exclusively upon economies of scale criteria in cases of smallness or undercapacity. In the early 1990s, however, several protracted battles over school consolidation played out in the state media whereby county school boards consolidated several community schools in opposition to local community protest. For example, Tollesboro School, in Lewis County, was closed amid great public outcry as the county board complained that their hands were tied in a matter dictated under terms of the "Grey Book." This former school facilities manual forbade the expenditure of state monies for necessary building repair at Tollesboro, as it's enrollment was too small by their criteria. Tollesboro parents and community members at the time pointed out that most KERA policies were predicated upon the notion that strong school and community ties were critical to the educational process, and citizens wondered how KERA aims could be achieved if good small schools with high parent involvement were closed by bureaucratic mechanisms conceived of before KERA.

Concurring that KERA had ushered in a new philosophy of schooling whereby local parent groups were to be encouraged to support and be involved in their schools, the state school board in 1992 commissioned a study group to propose a new school

facilities evaluative process for recommendation to the board. These guidelines became policy in 1994-95.

School Facilities Planning and the Grey Book

Mike Luscher was former state school facilities director in the 1980s, and he helped to create what rural school districts came to dread: the Grey Book. Actually, the Grey Book referred to the color of the book cover, not it's title. It was the Kentucky State Board of Education School Facilities Construction Criteria 7. This book came to strike fear into the hearts of many Kentucky communities during the 1980s because it was the source of economies of scale criteria used to categorize all schools for state facilities upgrades and improvements. The four primary categories where efficiency and economies of scale variables were critical in the evaluation process were curricular breadth, transportation distances, school site size and quality, and fiscal equity within the district. In other words, a school had to provide a minimum state approved curriculum for all children, could not bus students long distances to any site, could not cost the district substantially more to educate children in a small site compared to a larger facility, and had to meet minimum standards for building quality and longevity (as defined by the state).

Unfortunately, many small schools did not qualify for state building improvement funds once such minimum criteria were utilized to categorize district schools. And, if and when a district had to rely completely upon local revenue sources to

make required building improvements (also dictated by the state), resulting costs to less affluent districts usually led to school consolidation.

The basic process was this: every school district in Kentucky had a periodic review cycle supervised by the state Building and Grounds division. Part of this review focused upon school district needs to meet (often changing) minimum standards for building code changes, space requirement additions for existing or new programs, etc. Following this audit, building enhancement needs were prioritized within the district and available funds from the Kentucky School Building Authority were made available for improvements based upon local priorities.

Unfortunately, state funds could only be used for "permanent" school centers, not for "interim" school centers. Almost every criteria used prior to KERA since mid-century were economies of scale criteria as listed above and dictated by the state. These criteria focused upon logical but clearly arbitrary minimum and maximum items like how many acres a school plant was located within, how many students were enrolled at the site, how old the building structure was, etc. The Grey Book detailed how large the campus had to be to receive state funds, how many students had to be in attendance for the school to receive state funds, and if the building was new enough to receive state funds, etc..

Of course, there were also economies of scale protections in the Grey Book. Bus rides could not be too long for children to be sent to a particular school as we have mentioned, and schools

could be too large. It is quite possible that such provisions blunted some school consolidation pressures: parent groups could and did object to long bus rides and some efforts to build mega-schools were opposed on criteria provided by the state to zealous pro-consolidation school boards. New permanent high school centers could only get state funds if their enrollments were to fall between 750 and 1500 students (in 1986); middle school enrollments had to lie between 450 and 900 students, etc.

Predictably, though, many older and more rural schools could not meet economies of scale criteria mandated by the Kentucky Board of Education. When a rural district had an elementary school with fewer than 300 students or a high school with fewer than 750 students, or a 30 year old building, it almost automatically became an Interim Center. The local district was still required to make repairs or improvements, but the local district could not use any state money for these required repairs.

This situation was grim for many financially strapped rural school districts, but it was actually even worse. That is, even if one of Kentucky's 176 school districts wanted to retain a small school and pay for improvements from local budgets, the state was not satisfied. In order to spend ANY state money for ANY within-district school improvements to ANY building, a local district had to deal with their Interim Center issues first 8. Either they were required to redraw attendance boundaries in order to turn an Interim Center into a Permanent Center (thus

making it eligible for state expenditures), or they had to consolidate one or more Interim Centers into a larger facility BEFORE they could spend ANY state money on other projects. It was the mission of the state legislature, as administered by the state board, to use the Buildings and Grounds Department and the Grey Book to force local districts to become more efficient and cost effective. The B&G department head throughout the 1980s insists that the state board was instructed to bring local districts into "best practices" compliance "kicking and screaming" if this was necessary. And the four-member team that went out to every school district carrying the Grey Book with them became infamous all over the state.

Revising the Grey Book

Marilyn Applegate was a concerned parent and citizen in the Tollesboro community on the west side of Lewis County Kentucky. Lewis County High School was located 20 miles to the east in the county seat of Vanceburg. Tollesboro School (K-12) had been classified for years as an interim center since its enrollment was far below that specified by the state over the past three decades. On paper, it had been under threat of closure by the state for decades because it was too small to qualify for Permanent status in the eyes of the Buildings and Grounds department and the Grey Book. Tollesboro parents had for about the same length of time fought consolidation one way or another, primarily by always supporting county school board candidates who promised not to close their school. The Tollesboro case was

widely publicized in the late 1980s and early 1990s, and appeals to both the pre-KERA and post-KERA State School Boards were made when the Lewis County Board voted on several separate occasions during this period to close the facility.

The reconstituted state school board that assumed their duties in 1990s would later rule that they could not override an earlier local board decision on the Tollesboro case. However, the State Board realized that a new facilities policy had to be created that was in line with the philosophy of KERA, since they agreed that good small schools should have some hope of being retained. They confided this observation to concerned parents of Tollesboro and other petitioners during mandated reviews of contested school closing hearings in the early 1990s. Ms. Applegate, who wrote about this experience, tells the story well 9:

> ... it was at this time that state school board members expressed sympathy with us, and agreed that, ideally, schools such as ours should not be closed. They said that under the current regulations they were finding it impossible to go along with the newly adopted Kentucky Reform Act guidelines. With the introduction of KERA there were all sorts of problems in complying with the current facilities manual, including the determination of what schools to close or keep open. We were told that schools such as ours would definitely be kept in mind during the revision of the manual. Although our school was closed, we at least felt that someone was listening to us.

The new board then decided that a study group was necessary to consider and propose a new facilities process and policy which would be more consistent with the spirit and objectives of the Kentucky Educational Reform Act. Ms. Applegate was contacted by

the state education department, and was ...

> asked to serve on a committee that would revise the so-called "Grey book," the school facilities manual. The committee consisted of approximately 30 people throughout the state of Kentucky and would include superintendents and other administrators, architects, engineers, people representing school organizations and (opponents of school) consolidation, parents, and departmental personnel--all of whom would represent the various elements of the educational system. I felt it was something I had to do and I was honored they had asked me. I had never done anything like this before. How could I as a parent have any input or stack up to a group of people of this caliber?

Ms. Applegate reported serious apprehension about attending her first meeting with this group:

> ... I had already gone through so much that was negative with our local district. I didn't know what changes the committee would desire and wondered how much discussion would even be welcome. Would I be the only one there that could relate to the importance of keeping small, successful schools open?
>
> The facilities manual, the "grey book," was given to us to read. The committee was divided into groups of five or six. Each section was analyzed in light of KERA guidelines. Everyone on the committee had the opportunity to share their experiences and give examples of how their district worked. What impressed me the most about this committee was that we could, and did, actually discuss situations, problems and the effects of change. We didn't always agree, but we came to what we thought was the best decision. I learned that as a whole, we were all there with the same goals in mind: the get the best education for every child and to strive constantly for improvement. With these common goals, we all cooperated, combining our ideas of what was working, or what wasn't working, and thinking of workable solutions to suit all the schools. We definitely wanted flexibility in each school system.

The net effect of the committee's deliberations I sketched earlier in this paper. Marilyn Applegate's perceptions and interpretations, though, are clear and poignant. Several major

alterations in the process and categories created to deal with school size and funding issues emerged: There would be a new group assigned to consider local district needs; ultimate school facilities decisions would be given over to local boards; and criteria for receiving state monies for smaller schools would be expanded. Ms. Applegate continues:

> A dramatic change was made in determining the way schools were designated permanent-center schools. It was (here) that a key idea of KERA was put into effect: that it was important that all people be a part of educating our children. (High) Parent and community support is one of KERA's six new criteria (for establishing Permanent Center status for schools). The media is filled with more and more each day about the importance of community support in the educational process. It was the committee's intention at this time - since there is a strong correlation between parent and community support and good schools - to emphasize this particular criteria and to keep small schools open if they are well-supported and successful. However, each school must prove there is support.

As Marilyn notes, there were two new criteria identified by this committee which could be used by a local district in any appeal to qualify a smaller school for Permanent Center status beyond economies of scale factors. One has to do with parent involvement. A school satisfying this criteria has to be "exceptional," which is defined as meeting at least three of four criteria: documented annual volunteer hours by parents in the school equal to the number of pupils enrolled that year; PTA/PTO membership equal to 75% of enrollment; one program annually supported by an outside business or professional organization; and/or the school shall have been available for or have sponsored one community service program annually. 10

Ms. Applegate notes another new factor consistent with KERA aims: progress toward KIRIS (Kentucky Instructional Results Information System) target scores. KIRIS is the new accountability system which established baseline (threshold) school achievement data for every school in 1991, and holds schools responsible for consistent progress above this threshold over a continuous two year assessment cycle. Every Kentucky school is judged to be either meeting or not meeting its target every two years, and those that meet (or exceed) the target during years of the LPC planning cycle now also meet one of the six criteria for Permanent Center status.

Every school evaluated as a Permanent Center since the 1994-95 academic year must meet at least four of six criteria, and Marilyn Applegate notes with great satisfaction (above) these two new non-economies of scale criteria. She also underscored that the new Kentucky process for making ultimate school facilities decisions resides with the LPC and the local board. The former Buildings and Grounds Department was refocused and redefined to no longer be "hatchetmen" for a top-down state school board. They are now the "Division of Facilities Management," and the state school board has "gotten out of the school consolidation business." At least theoretically.

All is not as rosy as it might seem, though, for unabashed advocates of small schools. There remains a cost to a county or independent district to retain very small schools. Minimum desired enrollments are reduced in the new facilities manual.

Schools are no longer designated as "Interim Centers," and instead can be categorized by local boards as "Functional Centers." Minimum high school size from 1994-95 onward is suggested at 500 students, compared to 750 in 1986. Middle schools are down from 450 to 400, etc. But schools that now fall below such minimum enrollment recommendations, even if they are judged to be Permanent Centers, only receive proportional state moneys for improvements or additions if and when they fall below such minimums as suggested above. This means that if a district LPC recommends a small school be kept open, then some money required for improvements or additions to a small school will have to come from local funds and thus impact other programs in the district. For instance, a 300 student high school that a local district wants to invest money in can only get 3/5s of its money for these improvements from the state since it has only 3/5s of the recommended minimum number of students. Still, this is a vast policy improvement compared to the earlier policy:

> For Permanent Center status, a school must not only want to exist, but must prove they are a school which deserves to stay open. The minimum number of students required for a new facility to be constructed and/or an existing facility to be renovated was lowered. There was an exception to the minimum number which again would give more authority to the local district than ever before. The decision of whether to build or renovate is now in the hands of the local board members, and through the (new) Local Planning Committee. However, a school of fewer students will be penalized by the amount of School facilities Construction Commission funding they would receive, so the board's decision could depend on what the parents and the communities want. This decision-making exemplifies an important KERA principle, that is community involvement and the building of support for the local school (within the larger school district).

... Sometimes business decisions are made about schools, with too much emphasis on numbers. The overall picture is not seen because we get hung-up on one particular point. However, some districts will be able to overcome what some numbers indicate, because they will look at the overall picture and measure success by the job the school is doing. For other districts, numbers will be the only thing that matters when making important final decisions, one such as closing a school.

The committee's intention, through the (LPC) was to see parents and people in the field of education work together in the best interests of our children. All through the meetings, interest was focused on the problems of political involvement in past school decision-making, and what we could do to help improve it. It seemed as though every member related to this issue. It is a major concern when trying to put education into the hands of the community and people who work for the best interests of our children.

Ms. Applegate thus suggests that the new facilities manual was a great improvement over the former one, as is the new process. As a good citizen, though, she also realized that what emerged was a workable compromise on the matter of future school consolidation policy. In the final section of this paper, I consider some of the actual outcomes of the new policy. Marilyn Applegate concludes though with these words:

The committee was there with one goal in mind: making changes to improve and insure the best education for every child. With this in mind we all seemed to work together to combine our experiences and our ideas. The committee had such a short time to do such a tremendous task. The last time we were together we realized that we had not created a perfect solution to every situation, but hoped to be able to get back together for a revision of the manual after districts had the opportunity to use it and see if, and how well, some of the changes worked. The school facilities manual is not perfect, but there were good changes made. There is always room for improvement, no matter how long and hard you try.

Evaluating the New Facilities Review Process

There has been no study commissioned by the state department of education to ascertain the impact of the new facilities revue process since 1994-95 when it theoretically went into effect. Since the new process is staggered by district and must be done only every five years, statistical trends would be misleading at this point even if they were available. Some districts have yet to complete their LPC process under the new quidelines. Some ratified plans under the former system which were approved by Buildings and Grounds in the early 1990s.

Ms. Applegate's home district of Lewis County was a case in point. The board there was voted into office primarily on the Tollesboro situation, promising either to close or keep it open upon election. Since the majority of the board in the early 1990s was voted in due to their stance on consolidation, all they had to do was to keep the plan earlier adopted. Which they did. Today, about 20% of former Tollesboro students attend school in another county to protest the Lewis County board action. And the community of Tollesboro bought the former building and have started a private elementary school.

Meanwhile, statistics on school consolidations and closures based upon any former method are also hard to obtain currently. The new Division of Facilities Management claims not to be a watchdog agency, and has not aggregated data on closed schools across the state. They have district by district data, and publish figures on new school construction, but not on closed schools.

The Head of the Division of Facilities Management argues that he is an architect, not an oversight manager. The function of his staff is to give advice on new buiiding construction or upon old building renovation, but they are not involved in decisions about which schools get what. They see themselves as advisory upon request to local school districts. The new Facilities Planning Manual corroborates this interpretation:

> The Department (of School Facilities Planning) shall be available to (every) LPC to provide training and informational assistance. The Department shall be available to the LPC as a resource, but shall not be actively involved in the development of the master educational facility plan or the district facility plan. 11

Neither is there a publication in the Division of Facilities Management which even lists the number of schools in Kentucky. And while the general sentiment in this office is that kids prefer new and modern buildings to old and dilapidated ones, they only know about LPC deliberations informally as they are not part of the process.

The Case of Smith Mills School

How the revised facilities planning process might work throughout the state is suggested (but not elaborated upon) by Holly Holland's just published book of case studies on KERA. 12 The focus of her work is on three state educators and how the reform has affected their careers. One of the three case studies is about Gary Ecton, superintendent of Henderson County Schools, and his early attempts to balance his district's budget by

consolidating Smith Mills Elementary School. KERA, though, appeared to stymie top-down policy approaches like the one Mr. Ecton thought he could use in Henderson County. I quote extensively from Ms. Holland's chapter "Democracy is a Messy Business" here. An accomplished journalist, Ms. Holland nicely suggests at least the substance of how KERA's underlying philosophy undermined the former informal mode of consolidation decisions often made behind closed doors between board members and the superintendent. 13 I also note how the building of a middle school was considered as part of the early answer to Mr. Ecton's problem, which I have written about before! 14

> As superintendent of schools, Gary Ecton (accepted) his duty to set the course for the Henderson County Public Schools. But the state's timeline for implementing various KERA initiatives took much of the decision-making out of his hands. Like many other Kentucky educators, he spent a great deal of time following orders. As 1995 dawned, Ecton became so preoccupied with meeting deadlines and keeping the troops in line that he temporarily lost sight of his goals. Expediency got in the way of community. The ensuing controversy not only diverted attention from the school district's pressing problems with education reform, it also caused Ecton to lose vital support for his agenda. The situation started with a discussion about old school buildings. For several years, Henderson County school officials studied the district's long-term need for space. They produced cost estimates, consulted with architects and contractors, met with community representatives, and listened to recommendations from the Kentucky Department of Education. By state law, the district had to develop a five-year spending plan and rank projects by priority. High on Henderson's list was the need to relieve the district's single, overcrowded high school. In addition, Ecton wanted to consolidate several small, inefficient elementary schools, move sixth-graders from elementary schools to the junior high schools, and move ninth-graders to high school so the junior highs could become middle schools serving grades six through eight.
>
> However, when a committee of school district and community representatives (an advisory group whose participation in the process was required by the state) recommended $36, million worth

of construction expenses in the fall of 1994, Ecton and the school board balked. The committee's plan, however worthy, was just too costly. Because the school district expected to receive just $5.5 million from the state over the next five years to pay for its unmet construction needs, any additional funds would require a local tax increase. Board members didn't think Henderson County voters would approve one. Few citizens attended the three public hearings about the construction plan, which called into question the potential level of support. So, despite an impending state deadline, the board asked the committee to supply additional information and reconsider its suggestions.

Meanwhile, school officials privately discussed the future of Smith Mills Elementary, an old school on the outskirts of Henderson they had considered closing for at least a decade. With an enrollment of 130 students, Smith Mills was the smallest public school in the county. At a January administrative staff meeting, Nathaniel Green, principal at Smith Mills, announced that he planned to retire at the end of the semester. After inquiring about Green's future plans, the other administrators turned to Ecton. Would Green be replaced as principal, they asked, or would the district finally shut down the forty-eight-year-old school building?

In the brief discussion that followed, the superintendent sought opinions from the group. He was particularly interested in comments from administrators who lived near the school. When the meeting ended, Ecton decided to recommend to the school board that it close Smith Mills. The school's costs per-pupil were about $1,000 more than the district average. The roof needed major repairs. And Chandler Elementary was nearby, a new school with plenty of room. It seemed like an easy call. As Ecton discovered, however, even the most ordinary actions by a school district can take on monstrous proportions when people are uneasy about the future and overwhelmed by change. Soon after discussing the school's closure with his administrative team and informing the school board, Ecton approached the faculty and PTA at Smith Mills. About one hundred people attended a meeting where the superintendent laid out the facts. Few were hostile, but several expressed sorrow at the news. "If the school board's going to do this, kill us quickly and get it over with," Smith Mills resident Kathy Satterfield said. "I've cried every time it's come up," said Judy Powell, a Smith Mills teacher. "I'm prepared to cry again."

After that initial meeting, opposition to the closure intensified. At the February 20 school board meeting, about two dozen Smith Mills parents showed up and demanded another public hearing. Others took the battle to the media. Editorial writers at the local newspaper urged board members to act decisively to close Smith Mills, but readers had different ideas. "I realize the school needs repairs that are quite

costly because they needed them when I was there," Samantha Hoggard wrote to *The Gleaner* in March. "But what's a new roof and other repairs compared to the disruption it will cause if the school is closed? The school is the heart of the town. If it closes the town might as well close too." Steven Jackson wrote, too, asking "where is the discussion of issues that really impact the education of our children? Let's hear about lower student-to-teacher ratios, an environment easier to maintain discipline and order, and more opportunities for parent and student involvement."

On March 2, two hundred "small-school preservationists" squeezed into the tiny Smith Mills gymnasium for a public hearing on the closure. According to *The Gleaner's* account, the audience jeered and clapped its approval as several speakers accused school officials of delaying making needed repairs to Smith Mills, manipulating cost per pupil figures, and spending public money on luxury hotels at out-of-town conferences instead of on programs for students. Some hecklers questioned Ecton's $90,118 annual salary, implying that he should take a pay cut to spread the financial sacrifice around.

In the weeks that followed, opponents of other school district initiatives stepped up the attack, blaming the Smith Mills closure on excessive spending practices by administrators. Critics of KERA viewed the situation as another example of the lack of respect school leaders have for community concerns about education. Four months into the battle, Ecton raised the white flag. Public pressure was one of the unfortunate and expected side effects of being a superintendent. He knew the score. But this controversy felt different, and Ecton wasn't sure why. Confused and indecisive, he tried to sort out his thoughts about Smith Mills. One evening he sat before his computer and typed out a four-page memo to school board members.

"The first thing I've tried to keep in the forefront is that this is not about winning and losing," he wrote. "It's about making the right decision." The reasons for closing Smith Mills seemed clear, he said. The school district could immediately save $140,000 and send the staff and students from Smith Mills to Chandler. "We agreed that if something was going to be done, it needed to happen right away to allow for an orderly transition," he wrote. "So, I discussed it with you and told you that [it] looked like the time to seriously look at closing the school was here-even though this meant singling out Smith Mills before the facility plan was completed.

"Looking back, it still seems like the logical thing to do-certainly to at least take a hard look at it. Which is where we are now - taking a hard look and trying to decide what to do. Is there any doubt? Frankly, I now have a few. (Okay! Okay! I know! I'm the one who brought <u>you</u> to this dance and now you're

wondering if I'm going to leave you to find your own way home!) Let me explain." He said he never had minded making unpopular decisions when he knew the facts were on his side. But somehow, the plan to close Smith Mills just didn't feel right. Two other small elementary schools, Robards and Hebbardsville, were about as inefficient to operate as Smith Mills. Although questions remained about whether the school district had enough space in other schools to absorb the students at Robards and Hebbardsville, Smith Mills seemed to have been treated differently. ... I do feel like we have had the big picture in mind as we have been looking at the whole facilities issue. However, I now feel like the focus at Smith Mills for this immediate issue has not been on the big picture. At least, the big picture has not been communicated. Instead, we focused our discussion on reasons to close Smith Mills which dealt basically, for the most part, with just Smith Mills. I framed the argument wrong! This was my fault for getting in a rush."

By telling people the school was too expensive and needed repairs, Ecton said, he set up a false expectation that more money would fix the problem. So now, supporters of Smith Mills were trying to raise money to keep the school open and were looking for other savings within the school system. Instead, the point Ecton should have made was that Henderson County had too many schools. To get the most efficient use out of its buildings and staff the school district needed to get elementary school enrollments in the four hundred to five hundred student range.

Mr. Ecton appears clearly of the old school with assertions that four or five hundred student elementary schools ought to be the norm, but at least the message of KERA was that he would have to sell this idea to the public now, rather than rely upon the state department of education come in and do this job:

"How do we convince the people of this county about the funding problems we face?" he wrote. "How do we convince people that we cannot afford the number of schools we have? How do we convince people that the operational costs of adding another high school and middle school is a lot more than we can handle without a major tax increase? How do we convince people that we have serious operational funding problems now, such as teacher salaries? How do we convince people that there are very real equity issues which need to be addressed? Maybe we do need an independent financial study. Maybe we need this study before closing any schools. Have I confused you? I hope so because I want some company! This is a tough issue. I want us to be sure

we have thought through this very carefully before making a final decision. I will certainly support what you think we need to do."

... In mid-April, the Henderson Board of Education, with Ecton's support, decided to give Smith Mills a reprieve. Although some staff members encouraged him "to make the decision and move on," Ecton realized that he couldn't proceed with a process that he thought was rushed and undemocratic. Eventually, the community would have to decide whether it could afford to keep all of its schools, he said, but not now. People needed more information. They needed more time.

"The more I got into this, the more I didn't have a good feeling about what I was doing," Ecton said. "The bottom line is we had jumped out and made a piecemeal decision just because we could. We were doing this at the time we were trying to develop a facilities plan that we were going to involve the public in. But then, in effect, we said, 'Oh, but you can't decide about Smith Mills because we've already made that decision for you.' It seemed incongruous. We decided this was not the way we wanted to do things."

As they had with education reform in general, school leaders in Henderson failed to make their case in terms the public could understand and support. Furthermore, the Smith Mills controversy taught Ecton an important lesson about democracy: once you start sharing power with people, you take it back at political peril. "Over the years, I became more a part of the bureaucracy than I thought," he said. "We tend to think this is the only way to go because we've always done it this way. I try to put myself in their shoes. Am I really hearing them? If our argument is so good for closing schools, why aren't they buying it? If they want kids in smaller schools and closer to home, maybe we can find a way to do that."

On the Other Hand ...: the Case of Floyd County

Although small schools can be good schools, and although sometimes it might make sense to keep them open even in the face of larger district financial problems, at other times the local politics of place, combined with the state politics we have been discussing can overwhelm even the best. Appalachian Eastern Kentucky has several county school systems where earlier state emphasis upon building big new buildings and local board members

eager to spend state facilities monies to improve local contractors' incomes has undermined some good small schools there. Bill Bishop, long an opponent of rural school consolidation as Associate Editor of the Lexington Herald Leader, found the (previous) Floyd County School Board and not the state the culprit in perhaps the largest case of rural school consolidation since KERA. And this decision was recognized as being at odds with the state reform. In June of 1998, the Floyd county board (under "advisement" from the state) voted to close five small schools. The advice appears to have been almost mandatory in this case however, as Floyd County Schools have been taken over by the state department of education for being persistently in the red.

Bill Bishop tells the story in the H-L op-ed piece on June 21, 1998:

> Students at Harold Elementary School in Floyd County in 1996 scored the fourth highest of any group of Kentucky students on the state's math achievement test. That's just the start. Harold students ranked eighth on the reading test, seventh on the science test, 10th on the social studies test, 18th on the arts and humanities test and fourth on the writing test.
>
> Now, a question: Should the Harold Elementary School be kept open? Or should it be closed and its students sent to a school that didn't score in the top 25 on any of the state measures?
>
> Time's up. The real life answer is that Harold Elementary, one of the 10 best schools in the state, is due to be closed, shuttered this fall to help fill a gaping deficit in the budget of the Floyd County school district.
>
> This is the ultimate in sad mountain stories. The Floyd County school system has been so mismanaged over the years that it will be forced to close some of its best schools.

Apathy, mismanagement and corruption have joined to create a school system that eats the best of its young.

The Floyd County board voted this week to close four schools besides Harold and to move older students out of McDowell Elementary. (McDowell is also one of the state's Top 10 elementary schools.) The students will be scattered to other schools around the county.

Closing the schools is expected to save money, up to $700,000 a year. Floyd County needs the cash. The district has run a deficit the last three years. The school system's finances are in such a tangle nobody knows how deeply the district is in debt.

And the school district has bred new schools and classrooms like some kind of construction bunny. New schools have bounded to life at Duff and Prestonsburg and in the southern part of the county. The building contracts were a pleasure to hand out over the last few years--and the board passed them out with glee--but the new classrooms weren't needed. Floyd County now has fewer than 8,000 students and room to house 12,000. A brand-spanking new high school sits half empty. Meanwhile, the county is losing school-age children.

The only solution to the county's longstanding problems is to mothball some schools.

There are all kinds of good arguments against consolidating schools. Small schools work better than large ones. There are more opportunities for children to lead the science club or join the cheerleaders. Parents can have a say in their children's education. The outstanding schools at Harold and McDowell testify that small schools can do just as much, be just as good, as big schools in the cities.

This isn't a story of education theory, however. The closing of award-winning schools in Floyd County is all about the failure of a political culture.

The Floyd County school system is dysfunctional because Floyd County's politics are dysfunctional. The schools are bankrupt because the county's political culture is bankrupt.

Over the last 13 years, the Floyd County schools have run through a dozen superintendents. The state has filed charges against seven school board members. late last year, the state took over the school district--again.

"It's the system," new board member Cliff Latta told Herald-Leader reporter Lee Mueller. "Our focus the past 25 years has bene on building power bases rather than schoolchildren.

The new school board members, appointed by the state, have urged Floyd County citizens to get involved in the election of new school officials this fall. There appears to be little interest. At a forum last month, held by the board to gather ideas on how to handle the district's fiscal deficit, Floyd County Times staff writer Susan Allen reported that "no one showed up to voice their concerns to board members."

Is there a lack of leadership in Floyd County? I don't think so. The county has some of the brightest, most committed citizens in the state. The place just doesn't work.

And it's not alone. Knott County is known as the home of Eastern Kentucky's strongest leaders. Yet the county can't seem to hold an untainted election. During the recent primary, a county election official told reporter Mueller that she had heard people were buying absentee ballots with "anything they could...money, whiskey, pills, pot." What good is all that leadership if it can't hold a decent vote?

When a starfish loses an arm, it doesn't die. It just grows another. The Floyd County schools won't change until the county's political culture changes--until the starfish dies and the good people of the county create a whole new way of life.

Conclusion: KERA provides an opportunity, not a panacea

Since every state in the union has its own version of facilities planning and defines a school district differently, there is no easy way to determine if the new process used in Kentucky is applicable elsewhere. And as I have discussed, it is too soon even in Kentucky to see if the decentralized and participatory decision making model now adopted as state planning procedure will make any profound differences in this state.

Philosophically, however, state policy on schol units ought to at least partly take into account how well a small local school is supported by its constituents and how well the school is doing. In Kentucky, this last feature can be further influenced to the advantage of a small school since parents and community

members also have some limited ability to affect performance criteria via their SBDM council. Advocates of small schools ought to be able to use the new Kentucky policy as at least illustrative of how it could be done in other states.

On the other hand, as the several case studies quoted above document, democracy is a messy business. Their are likely large costs of time involved in sustaining and improving small schools, and much work to be done convincing parents and community members in larger places about the importance of smaller schools that might involve increased costs within larger districts. In Kentucky, though, the lid is off. And the former secrets - that parents are really not wanted at the local schoolhouse and that small schools are less desireable than larger schools - are at least debated these days. And these sorts of debates can only be positive for schooling, for democracy, and for small schools and their communities.

Endnotes

1. See Joyce D. Stern, The Condition of Education in Rural Schools, esp. Chapter 7. Washington, DC, US Department of Education, 1994.

2. See David Tyack, The One Best System. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1974. See also "The Urbanization of Rural Schools," by S. Rosenfeld and J. Sher in J. Sher (ed.) Education in rural America: A Reassessment of Conventional Wisdom. Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1977, pp. 11-42.

3. Alan J. DeYoung and Tom Boyd, "Urban School Reforms for a Rural District: A Case Study of School/Community Relations in Jackson County, Kentucky, 1899-1986." Journal of thought, 21(4); Winter, 1986; 25-42.

4. Blue Yonder Wilmington, OH: Orange Frazer Press.

5. See this discussion in Craig Howley, " Synthesis of the effects of school and district size: What the research says about achievement in small schools and school districts. Journal of Rural and Small Schools, 4(1), 2-12.

6. For a comprehensive description and analysis of KERA objectives and recent research on its effectiveness, see J. Lindle, J. Petrosko and R. Pankratz (eds) 1996 Review of Research on the Kentucky Educational Reform Act. Lexington, KY: Institute on Education Reform.

7. School Facilities Construction Criteria. The Kentucky State Board of Education. Frankfort, KY; revised, October, 1986.

8. Interview with Mr. Mike Luscher, former head of Kentucky Department of Education Buildings and Grounds Division, currently head of facilities planning, Scott County (KY) Schools.

9. Marilyn Applegate, "Facilitating Education: On Revision of "The Gray Book." Across the Ridge (Journal of the University of Kentucky Appalachian Center), pp. 11-16. Lexington, KY, Spring, 1994

10. The study group recommended policies discussed here, which were for the most part adopted and can today be found in The Kentucky School Facilities Planning Manual. Kentucky State Board for Elementary and Secondary Education. Frankfort, KY; revised, December, 1994.

11. Ibid, p. 6. Opinions expressed were by Mark Ryles, Director of the Division of Facilities Management. Personal interview, October 8, 1997.

12. Holly Hunter, Making Change: Three Educators join the Battle for Better Schools. Portsmith, NH: Heinemann, 1998.

13. See my discussion of Kentucky behind-the-scenes dealing on facilities repair and consolidation in Struggline with their Histories: Economic Decline and Educational Improvement in Four Southeastern School districts. Norwood, NJ: Ablex, 1991.

14. A. DeYoung, C. Howley and P. Theobald. "The cultural contradictions of middle schooling for rural community survival." Journal of Research in Rural Education. 11(1): 24-35, 1995.